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Shri H.M. Patel(interviewee), recorded by

Shri B.R. Nanda(interviewer), date, page,
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Oral History Project.

H.M. PATEL, ICS (retd); b 27 Aug o4, at Bombay; s of Muljibhai & Hiraben; m, Savitaben; Ed: B.A., Oxford, B.Com, London; after passing exam in 26 began career as supernumerary Asst Collector, Larkana dist, Sind, 27, was separation officer, Sind, 35, received special training in matters connected with currency control and worked in Calcutta with Controller of Currencies and in Bombay with Accountant-Gen, 36, sec, Morison Stock Exchange Inquiry Cttee, May 37, went to U.K. and then to Hamburg as Trade Commissioner to GOI, Dep Sec, Eastern Supply Council, 41-42, Dep Dir-Gen of Supplies, 43, Cabinet Sec, 47, also Partition Sec and Sec, Min of Defence, 47-53, to Min of Food and Agriculture, 53-54, to Min of Finance, subsequently Principal Sec, 54-58, first Chmn of Life Insurance Corporation, Sept 56-57, retired from Govt. Service, 59; Chmn, Gujarat Electricity Board, 60-66, responsible for early execution of Dhuvaran project, is connected with a number of ed, social and public insts; mem, Gujarat Assembly, 67-Mar 71, of Lok Sabha, since Mar 71; pres,. Gujarat Swatantra Party, since 67, mem of National Council of All-India Swatantra Party; awd C.I.D., 46; chmn, Charutar Vidya Mandal, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Kaira Dist, Gujarat.

Shri H.M. Patel

Main points covered in the interview

Shri Patel spoke about the days when he was associated with the Cabinet Secretariat at the Centre between 1946 and 1947. He discussed the establishment of the Interim Government, the participation of the Muslim League in the Government, the functioning of the Cabinet Secretariat, the controversial budget of Liaquat Ali, the division in the Government and its effects on the Civil Service, the British preparation for the transfer of power and the working of the Partition Council. He also recorded his reminiscences of Wavell, Mountbatten, Nehru, Patel, Liaquat Ali, V.P. Menon and others.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

SHRI H.M. PATEL

RECORDED ON 31.10.1968:

Shri Nanda: Mr. Patel, during the Second World War, you were mostly busy with the Supply Department and with the war efforts; did you have any contact with the Home Department or The political events during that period?

Shri Patel: No, I did not have any.

Shri Nanda: Your first contact with these developments, I take it, took place when you became Secretary to the Cabinet in 1946.

Shri Patel: That is very correct, I think.

Shri Nanda: How did this happen, your appointment as Secretary to the Cabinet?

Shri Patel: Well, in the middle of 1945, a new Department called the Department of Industries and Civil Supplies was created. That was created when certain new types of problems began to develop in the country; problems of shortage of supplies of essential goods like cloth and so on, and prices began to rise. At that stage, it was felt that a new Department should be created with Akbar Hydari as the Secretary and I was his Joint-Secretary. That Department was short-lived, soon after the War was over and things became somewhat more normal, then the Department was merged in the older Department of Supply. I think it was called Department

of Industries and Supply. And I went over to the Cabinet Secretariat as Joint Secretary (Cabinet). Sir Eric Coates was the Secretary of the Cabinet. In fact, the Cabinet organisation was started at the beginning of 1946 or towards the end of 1945; but I think, it was probably in the beginning of 1946.

Shri Nanda: I take it that there was no such thing as a Cabinet. The Viceroy's Council did function departmentally most of the time, only certain matters were discussed and the Viceroy had a veto; it could not function as a united Cabinet vis-a-vis the Viceroy.

Shri Patel: That is true, in a sense the Cabinet Organisation was developed in anticipation of certain political developments, which it was thought, would occur.

Shri Nanda: By Lord Wavell?

Shri Patel: Yes, by Lord Wavell.

Shri Nanda: Were you the first Indian or the only Indian in this organisation?

Shri Patel: I was the first Indian as a senior officer. There was an Under-Secretary. In fact, the only European was Sir Eric Coates; all the rest of the staff was Indian. The Cabinet Secretariat was organised on the lines of the Cabinet Secretariat in the United Kingdom. Formerly, there was a Secretary to the Executive Council. The Law Secretary used to hold that position. But after Sir Eric

Coates came in, when this organisation was established, then they (the British) started working the Executive Council also as if it were a Cabinet. But this was in anticipation of political developments which they anticipated. For instance, there was with this Cabinet Secretariat an organ set up also, a Military Wing: for the first time the civil and the Military were sought to be brought in close touch with each other. The Military Wing was staffed by deputing a Brigadier and a Major from the army. And one of the first things I was asked to do by Sir Eric Coates was to go round the country and see all the military installations and meet the Armed Forces formations and he arranged it with Field Marshal Montgomery for me to do that.

Shri Nanda: Was this before the Cabinet Mission came or after it?

Shri Patel: This was before the Cabinet Mission came.

Shri Nanda: This would confirm the impression that the stage was being cleared for the transfer of power by Wavell?

Shri Patel: That is clear. But what precise form the transfer of power would take was not certain or clear in anybody's mind.

Shri Nanda: Did you have the impression in the beginning of 1946 that the British were about to depart?

Shri Patel: I would not say that in the beginning of 1946 we had that feeling that the British would depart soon.

Shri Nanda: Because you were very much inside the Government.

Shri Patel: Quite true. In the beginning of 1946 one felt that the changes would take place in the fairly near future, but I do not think that anybody really could anticipate that the changes of this final nature would take place within the matter of a year and a half or so.

Shri Nanda: Now as Cabinet Secretary your official contact with Indian political leaders naturally came when the Interim Government was formed.

Shri Patel: That is correct.

Shri Nanda: And could you tell us how you took the news of the formation of Interim Government and how were your first contacts with Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel and others? In the ceremony, I am sure you were present.

Shri Patel: Yes, I was, because as Joint Secretary to the Cabinet, I accompanied the Cabinet Secretary to the Cabinet meetings and it was my duty, in fact, to write the minutes of the Cabinet even at that stage. In fact, I was taken in order to be groomed to become the Cabinet Secretary. That was probably the intention. When the decision was taken in regard to the Interim Government one of the first

things I remember was this: there was one problem which Sir Eric Coates had to settle was how to seat the members of the Interim Government around the Cabinet table and Sir Eric Coates asked me to go and meet Pandit Nehru and ascertain from him what his wishes were. I went and met Pandit Nehru at a house in Hardinge Avenue. I think it was R.K. Nehru's house then, and there I put this question to him.

Shri Nanda: He must have been amused.

Shri Patel: I had been sent to ask him about this. He was, as you say, amused; at the same time, I think, he realised that there was some force in it and what is more, he applied his mind to it, and then after making some general suggestions, he said, "I think the best course would be for you to go and have a talk with Sardar Patel." So I proceeded from his place to see Sardar Patel who was staying at Birla House, and I told him what the broad ideas of Pandit Nehru were on the subjectand asked him for his suggestions. And then according to them, the seating arrangement was made.

Shri Nanda: What was the seating arrangement, incidentally?

Shri Patel: I think that proved to be not so very difficult. But it was the question of the senior-most, who obviously was Pandit Nehru, next came Sardar Patel; these two were mentioned by Pandit Nehru. The rest were left to Sardar Patel to suggest. Next was Maulana Azad, I think. Thereafter, there was Jagjivan Ram - who was far behind him.

Shri Nanda: So the protocol had started. I am amused because I am sure Gandhiji would have given the answer, "You go and sit round the table as one comes and the Chairman must sit in the spot which is central. Nothing more is required."

Shri Patel: As a matter of fact, Sardar Patel, in a way, said that kind of thing.

Shri Nanda: I am not sure if there is any order of precedence in the British Cabinet. Do they sit like that?

Shri Patel: They don't sit anywhere.

Shri Nanda: Round the table?

Shri Patel: No.

Shri Nanda: Any way, we borrowed their protocol.

Shri Patel: But the protocol was left to be determined. There was no question of anything else. And of course, there was a tremendous amount of enthusiasm in the Secretariat and everywhere, when the Interim Government was sworn in and, in fact, I had quite a job to bring in Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel and the rest of them to their respective rooms because the whole Civil Service Staff, like any other crowd, wanted to see them everywhere, jostle them and so forth. It was a great and certainly a historic moment, an exciting moment. There is no doubt about it.

Shri Nanda: The swearing-in ceremony was held in, I should say, the Viceroy's House.

Shri Patel: The swearing-in ceremony was held in the Viceroy's House in the Cabinet room itself.

Shri Nanda: Is it the same Cabinet Room which is being used?

Shri Patel: Same Cabinet Room; it is still being used.

Shri Nanda: Anything exciting that you remember of that ceremony.

Shri Patel: There was nothing exciting about it.

Shri Nanda: There was no question of oath being taken in Hindi or Gujarati or Marathi?

Shri Patel: They all took it in English and made no fuss about it.

Shri Nanda: Was Lord Wavell present?

Shri Patel: Yes, he was present.

Shri Nanda: Incidentally, you would recall that there was lot of tension in the Muslim League and some very strong words were used by Jinnah and others at that time. Did you think that the Interim Government had any feeling that it was incomplete at that time or things might not be easy for them?

Shri Patel: Those who constituted the Interim Government, as it was formed in September 1946, that is to say, Pandit Nehru and others, were in the least bothered about it. They set about their tasks as if they were the complete Government of India.

Shri Nanda: Well, a couple of months later, the Muslim League came in and you continued to be the Secretary to the Cabinet and then what happened to the working of the Cabinet?

Shri Patel: Well, I should have mentioned one other thing that I was, at that stage when the Interim Government came in, also made the Principal Private Secretary to Pandit Nehru in addition to my task as the Joint Secretary of the Cabinet.

Shri Nanda: What did this involve?

Shri Patel: That involved really nothing very much, but whatever Pandit Nehru wanted of me. In other words, my services were available to Pandit Nehru for the purpose of any information that he might require regarding the Government and Government Departments.

Shri Nanda: How did he make use of your services?

Shri Patel: He asked for me whenever he wanted to know something.

Shri Nanda: Did you see him quite often?

Shri Patel: Yes, I saw him quite often, but it was in an informal way in the sense that I did not have to sit down and do anything for him. But he would consult; "here is some problem: whom could I send this on to or who would be really concerned, you think etc.", and I was probably useful that way at that stage.

I was forgetting the rest of your question, the position when Muslim League came in. Of course, then a certain amount of re-arrangement of seating arrangement also took place; a re-distribution of portfolios took place. And of course, the other developments were of a much more significant nature which were these; that virtually there were two Cabinets, Pandit Nehru and his other colleagues met separately invariably before they came to Cabinet meetings: and so also did the Muslim League members. For the Secretariat it meant a certain amount of inconvenience, because they would be called in at times by both to explain things and so on. And we had in the Cabinet Secretariat one Under Secretary who was a Muslim and later a Muslim also.

Shri Nanda: Name? Was he a bright chap?

Shri Patel: He was very nice boy too. He was in the Audit Service. The Deputy Secretary was Usman Ali from Madras.

Shri Nanda: That is right.

Shri Patel: But I must say that at this stage

there was nothing dubions so far as the Cabinet Secretariat was concerned. Whatever was asked of anybody was all conveyed to the top persons which is to say, myself and Sir Eric Coates.

Shri Nanda: And then came the riots. In fact, the riots had already taken place in Bengal?

Shri Patel: I think, I might mention perhaps one of the most interesting episodes, events, during the time when the Muslim League and the Congress were working together. It was that famous Budget.

Shri Nanda: Liaquat Ali Budget?

Shri Patel: Liaquat Ali Budget. There I must say that from the point of view of the Cabinet Secretariat, we were somewhat surprised at the subsequent developments because special care was taken by us to explain to everybody and particularly to Pandit Nehru as to what the practice was in regard to the Budget. According to practice the Budget would be explained in the Cabinet, but its details would not be divulged. All the basic changes and principles would be explained at the Cabinet meeting, and thereafter, it would be considered that everybody had accepted it. If, there was any point to be raised, it had to be raised at the Cabinet meeting. It was also explained to them that the proposals formulated by the Finance Minister would also come before the Cabinet after they would have been explained fully to the Viceroy. Accordingly, these proposals were explained to everybody in the Cabinet, and to the best of my recollection, no major

objection was taken by anybody.

Then when it came before the Parliament, when the Budget Speech was made and the proposals were revealed, then the fat was suddenly in the fire. The public criticism regarding certain proposals was such that the Congress felt that somehow it had been misled into agreeing to something, which might conceivably do a great deal of harm to at least those sections of people who were their supporters. As a result, there had to be a subsequent discussion and so forth. But I recollect this particular situation somewhat vividly because I had to go along and try and satisfy Pandit Nehru, and Sardar Patel in particular, as to why the objections that were now being taken could not really be taken. They could not say that the proposals had not been put to them and that these had not been accepted by them.

Shri Nanda: Well, I am sure you have always been interested in economic matters and your long experience during the War was primarily with the economic issues, and your insight into financial and industrial problems was most useful to us. In assessing, as you look back to 1946, were there any grounds for the objections which the Congress took to the Liaquat Ali Budget? Or, was it, as alleged by Muslim League partisans, that the Indian businessmen (and one or two were mentioned even by name) tried to turn personal issues into sort of national issues?

Shri Patel: I would say that there was really no real serious justification for the Congress to have made such a big issue of this.

Shri Nanda: Do you think that after that the Congress itself had proposed measures which had been very drastic against industry and business-houses and so on, its taxation and other policies and, therefore, the mild dose from Liaquat Ali could have been taken with indifference?

Shri Patel: That is quite correct. They should have done so, in fact.

Shri Nanda: What were those items which were thought to constitute an attack on Hindu Commerce and Trade?

Shri Patel: Well, I do not think that there was anything that could be taken as an attack on Hindu commerce.

Shri Nanda: If it was not that; if it had been an attack on Birla; then I think the argument would be even weaker. You can't promote or you can't protect a particular industrialist.

Shri Patel: I do not think that there was any particular industrialist or a group of industrialists which was hurt by this Budget.

Shri Nanda: How do you explain this?

Shri Patel: I would explain it as a purely emotional reaction as the people just felt that here was an attempt

at hitting on industry and trade, and industry and trade was so largely in the hands of Hindus that it must have been felt that this was an attempt by the Muslim League to harm the Hindus who were very great supporters of the Congress. I might say this as one who was not then directly connected with the formulation of the Budget and so on; but certainly I was concerned with explaining the Budget proposals to various people and at no time did the idea enter my head that here was something terrible being done to undermine as it were, the Congress prestige or the country's economy. As you rightly said just now, since then the Congress Government has done a great many things which have gone much beyond anything that was then attempted, and that in fact you could hardly say that anything major was attempted then.

Shri Nanda: Then these proposals were modified, Budget proposals, I mean.

Shri Patel: They were only modified in a very nominal way. In fact, those modifications themselves were of such a nature that if those modifications were sufficient to satisfy the Congress, it indicated that (they were in themselves, I do not think that) they did not realise what they were making a fuss about.

Shri Nanda: Apart from the Budget, how did the League and the Congress members get on about other issues?

Shri Patel: That, of course, was the big thing; virtually Government came to a stand-still very quickly,

because there would always be an attempt on the part of Muslim member to oppose even good proposals made by the Congress Ministers.

Shri Nanda: The obstruction was from the Muslims?

Shri Patel: The obstruction was very largely from the Muslims, I would say, almost entirely.

Shri Nanda: Who among the Muslim members impressed you as the abler ones?

Shri Patel: Liaquat Ali undoubtedly struck me as an able person, and I would also say that on the whole, he behaved in a very responsible way. Even in opposing, I don't think, he took somewhat intransigent line as some of his other colleagues like Abdul Nishtar used to take.

Shri Nanda: But Chundrigar was there and he was an able person, able as a lawyer and industrious. Did this political division between the members of the Cabinet influence the working of the Civil service at lower levels?

Shri Patel: I would not say that it influenced the working at the civil service level. There were, of course, Senior Indian officers - Hindu and Muslim officers and there were British officials also. But it was not so much the civil servants who were affected in any major way. They were still putting up work in a comparatively objective manner. I think there were certain senior Muslim officers who were advising

the Muslim Ministers informally. But in their work as civil servants it would be difficult to point to any particular action as deliberately partisan. But the real seriousness of the situation, the way in which the Muslims and the Congress Ministers found it difficult to work together, was, I think, its effect on the Congress Ministers. They felt that it was quite impossible to work together and that the sooner the division could come the better. In fact, I should say, along with it, there were two factors which influenced a lot, one was the riots in Calcutta and Bihar, and elsewhere, and in the Punjab too; and the other was that if the Muslims were to remain in the same Government, it would never be possible for the Congress to put through the kind of national development policies that they intended to bring in. This certainly worked and influenced the minds of many.

Shri Nanda: There was a kind of division down in the middle, even among the Muslim clerks and the Superintendents. You know there was a sort of over-stepping either informally or formally, the pitch queered for one-side and the other. This kind of a taint which can come and spread very quickly.

Shri Patel: It can; but I would say that I do not think that it spread to any great extent at the stage.

Shri Nanda: Well, I am surprised to listen that.

Shri Patel: This is my feeling.

Shri Nanda: What about your own Cabinet Secretariat?

Shri Patel: As Cabinet Secretary, I can say without any hesitation that this kind of development did not take place. We had completely loyal officers exactly as if there had been no Interim Government.

Shri Nanda: But the Cabinet Secretariat was probably exceptional in this sense. It had not come into contact with public or politicians. It came into contact with members of the Government and Sir Eric Coates and you were there. But it all depended who was on the top and who was important. Had you started taking side with the Congress then the Cabinet Secretariat could have also been divided.

Shri Patel: That is merely because this could not take place in the Cabinet Secretariat. Except in one, in the Finance Ministry, I don't think that it really took place or occurred to any great extent in any other Ministry. In Finance Ministry, it happened. Again there also because there were certain Muslim officers who were fairly senior.

Shri Nanda: That brings me to another question. You were in the higher ranks of the Civil Service during the War, say from 1939-45, and you were working with non-Hindu officers, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and the British and so on. Don't you think that the sectarian or the communal prejudice was there?

Shri Patel: No, I do not think so. I worked with

officers of all communities.

Shri Nanda: Even when the Muslim League claimed Pakistan in 1940 and a great deal of tension had been worked on communal lines you feel that it had not come to the surface in the civil service?

Shri Patel: It had not come to the surface in the civil service to a great extent. There were individual civil servants, who would show the depth of their feeling openly in discussions, but those were the people who had perhaps become almost fanatic in their thinking. But they were very few. I know a great many Muslim officers in different fields including some who I know, later held among the highest positions in Pakistan. But I should say even after they held these high positions in Pakistan too, that quite 50% of those officers did not have fanatic attitude in this regard, even afterwards. But there were people who did begin to think in terms of Muslims' interest vs. other interests. But they were not many and I think the actual work was never greatly affected.

Shri Nanda: Now one of the very difficult and the delicate tasks in the winter of 1946-47 was the question of communal riots. They were spreading and the Cabinet was concerned with them directly or indirectly in getting reports from the Provinces. They were probably trying also to formulate some kind of joint, co-ordinate action. How did the Cabinet as a whole, Muslims League and Congress members, cooperate?

Shri Patel: Well, it is the Home Ministry, that

would primarily be concerned with law and order matters. The individual Cabinet Ministers reponsible for other Departments would not be concerned at all, unless the matter came up before the Cabinet. In fact the other Ministers would not even have an opportunity for expressing their views on the subject. It would, of course, be open to a Cabinet Minister to ask questions at a Cabinet Meeting of the Governor-General for information. The Home Ministry was in the hands of Sardar Patel, who, I think was in-charge of the Home Ministry and he would report to the Cabinet that such such a thing had happened and the actions taken by him. He did not go to them asking 'what shall I do?'.

Shri Nanda: Did the presentation of the situation by the Home Minister evoke any comments from the Muslim League Members?

Shri Patel: Sometimes, and then the comments would be more of the nature, "no, no this perhaps was exaggerated;" that may be.

Shri Nanda: It is an exaggeration in Bengal; it is an understatement in Bihar.

Shri Patel: Something like that. An interesting thing, looking back on it now, was that the people, the Ministers, who went into these areas after these events took place, were all the Congress Ministers. Hardly ever did any of the Muslim Ministers go.

Shri Nanda: How dow you explain that?

Shri Patel: I can't explain that. I am merely saying that looking back on it, it seems strange.

Shri Nanda: They did not even go to Bihar to sympathise even with their own co-religionists.

Shri Patel: No, they did not go to Bihar.

Shri Nanda: And they did not go to Bengal to sympathise with the minority which had been oppressed.

Shri Patel: Not even to the Punjab.

Shri Nanda: This is very significant; but as you say it is difficult to answer it. With two sections going against each other the Central Government came to a standstill and Attlee appointed Mountbatten. Did you have the feeling at that time that Wavell is being sacked?

Shri Patel: No, I do not think so. But a point was reached where Wavell himself did not know what was the next thing that he should do. It was a situation where, so far as he was concerned, he had reached the end of his ingenuity at that point.

Shri Nanda: Did he, while presiding at the Cabinet meetings, give you the impression that he was in command at those meetings or he was just flabbergasting, drifting with the things as they were happening?

Shri Patel: He was in command in this way that any discussions that took place were always conducted without any outward external heat being generated. But the views that were expressed were as irreconcilable as they could be. In fact, one of my tasks then was to discover what the decision was on any matter. On any proposal that would come from one or the other Ministry, there would be a lot of discussion and in the end, Wavell would say "Shall we move on to the next?" and turning to me, he would add 'I think you have got it.' I would say, 'Yes', and I would produce a decision.

Now that was unfortunately almost inevitable. Later, I think it used to happen even in Pandit Nehru's days, but that was for different reasons. I might at this stage mention one thing which may not be in line with the questions that you have been putting me, but has some relevance. Early in either December 1946 or January 1947 Sir Eric Coates wanted to have a short leave and they appointed temporarily for the period as Secretary to the Cabinet, the then Home Secretary Mr. Porter. He was to hold charge as Cabinet Secretary in addition to his duties as the Home Secretary. I took this amiss. I mentioned this to Ceorge Abell, who was the Private Secretary to the Governor-General, that I could not understand why this had been done. I said, "Normally on short-leave vacancies, it is the practice to put the next man in the Organisation itself to hold charge. Why was this not done in this case?" Of course, Porter, who was

asked to hold charge, himself told me that there was absolutely nothing in this. It was merely that Eric Coates felt that there ought to be a senior man in charge. I would, of course, undoubtedly perhaps have the junior-most Secretary. I said, 'However, that may be, I could not quite see the point of it," and said, 'I felt this is not quite right.' Porter said,'But look, you are going to do the whole work. I am there. I am only there in case you want to ask me anything.' But the point why I am mentioning this story is for this reason that I got a letter from the Governor-General saying that he wanted to see me. So I went up from Delhi to Simla to see Lord Wavell. Wavell as you know, spoke very little. He said, 'George Abell tells me that you are unhappy about this. I would like to tell you that we have very high opinion of your work and there was no implied criticism or anything of this kind and you should not take in that light. The only object was this that the Cabinet Secretary should be a senior person who can also carry weight with all the other Secretaries and get them to do whatever is decided upon by the Government.' I said, 'I quite see that point. I am very grateful that you should have gone to the length of calling me up and explaining this personally. But permit me to say that I don't altogether agree.' Then I left. The point here is this that they did not want a Civil Servant, whom they trusted and respected, to feel that he had been unjustly treated. This is something which never happens nowa-days. The importance of maintaining the morale of the Civil

service is not realised. You can only maintain it only in this way that you take the trouble to explain your decisions. He gave a whole hour of his time to me going through various points and I gave him various reasons. However, that is not altogether the point. Eric Coates then quite suddenly decided that he would go in March, 1947 when Wavell was still there and the decision was taken that I would be invited to take charge from him as Cabinet Secretary.

Shri Nanda: This must have had something to do with your protest?

Shri Patel: Not necessarily. Possibly because I argued and explained things to him. I said, for instance, 'What is it that I cannot do which any of the other Secretaries can do?' I said, 'I am today conducting, for instance, the the Coordination Committee of Economic Affairs of the Cabinet and almost all these affairs are being handled by me.' So I think he had felt that though I was not senior, I did carry sufficient weight with atleast the British members of the Civil Service who were then Secretaries, and so far as the rest were concerned, they also had the same view. I think, they were probably aware, but this happened even before Wavell went. Erick Coates himself asked that I should be made the Cabinet Secretary.

Shri Nanda: Now we come to Attlee's February 20 Statement about the transfer of power by June 1948 and the appointment of Lord Mountbatten as Viceroy. Mountbatten came down in March and then things started moving.

Shri Patel: Now actually Mountbatten came without any definite statement or a definite date for transfer of power.

Shri Nanda: Well, I would put it this way that Attlee's statement in the House of Commons on February 20 mentioned that if the political parties in India were not able to agree on any solution, the British would still make over the Government to the existing Government, Provincial Government, Central Government, whatever were there and continue not later than June 1948. That is what he had said. But Mountbatten had moulded those instructions from Attlee which I think have been published partly and some of them we can guess now. He had some flexibility in those instructions about the date etc. But even Mountbatten did not imagine that the transfer of power could have been made before June 1948, when he came here.

Shri Patel: Certainly, he came here on the basis as if he had time till June 1948; that is correct. Of course, his coming was a most interesting affair. I remember how the impression he made when he took over as Governor-General. You felt that the impact of his personality on everybody was tremendous. Lord Wavell was a person who also was highly respected, and, undoubtedly, if you got closer to him, if you have occasion to do so, you would realise that though he might appear not so very brilliant etc., he really had a very good mind. But in the case of Mountbatten you felt, there

was a person oozing dynamism,charm and all the rest. This was the impact just his personality made, quite apart from anything else. And the way in which he operated was based a great deal upon his experience as the Supreme Commander in South-East Asia. He had brought with him his group of officers and those officers worked also close-in with the officers here. They were sufficiently tactful never to make the officers here feel that they were being by-passed, superseded and that they would not be playing their proper role.

Shri Nanda: But they were fresh of mind.

Shri Patel: Yes, they were certainly fresh of minds, but I don't think that they made any major contribution to any decisions.

Shri Nanda: But they gave Mountbatten the feeling what he was doing was the only alternative open to them.

Shri Patel: They functioned here as people with whom either the officers could discuss or Mountbatten himself would discuss. They were used by Mountbatten as trouble-shooters in some ways as also the persons who could find out how the land lay. There were occasions, I remember some instances where, for instance, I might hold quite strong views and made no secret of it. Then Ismay or somebody would come along, asking me, "Why not approach in this way, what about this," and so on and so forth. These are all interesting techniques of public administration and we ought

to follow many of these things. But we dont .

Shri Nanda: Instead of bringing a person right upto the Head of the Government or Head of the State, the best thing was to try to win over to your point of view with arguments or to modify your own point of view; so that the situation is reached, when intervention comes and it gives least offence to the people.

Shri Patel: Men like Ismay had been the head of the Military Wing of the Cabinet in Britain and he had been close to Churchill for many years. He was a very experienced person, and was full of tact. He had knowledge both of military and civil matters. Many issues he discussed with me informally in regard to how to approach these things. The entire partition papers were prepared, how to set about them was discussed first between John Christie, George Abel, myself and V.P. Menon, and although it may be said formally to be a paper drawn up by one of Mountbatten's officers it was wholly drawn up by me. But the point is that these other people who came from outside, they would all discuss individual points, suggest alternative courses - why not approach it in this or that way? And if you gave them good reasons, they would themselves explain that point to Mountbatten so that they played quite a useful role in that way. They were used in many ways very sensible ways, I may say.

Shri Nanda: How did you get on with V.P.?

Shri Patel: Very close we were; there was hardly any important issue on which he finally made up his mind without first discussing with me.

Shri Nanda: But you had very different backgrounds, both of you. Did you know each other before you met in this critical period, in Delhi or Simla?

Shri Patel: I did; I know him more or less from the date that I came to Government of India in 1940.

Shri Nanda: How did he impress you at that time?

Shri Patel: As a man of ideas, a man bubbling with energy.

Shri Nanda: Was it the detailed knowledge of the machine or the personality and the wider outlook which attracted him to the people like Mountbatten . What was really impressive in him?

Shri Patel: I think, the fact that he was a man of imagination and common sense. There must have been a great deal in him. He rose from the ranks as you might say.

Shri Nanda: Absolutely correct.

Shri Patel: And he worked by sheer power of his mind, flexibility of his thinking which was not just to say that he would adjust himself to anybody. He had his own ideas, but he could see the other persons' point of view

and quickly made up his mind whether there was something in it or not. He worked with very fine minds under the Reforms Commissioner. And when he became the Reforms Commissioner, just before all these major changes took place; everybody knew that he knew all the constitutional developments and thinking, constitutional thinking that had gone on for the past 20 years, ever since constitutional developments began to take place from Montford Reform and so on. And then he was always ready with a proposition. He would always say, "this is not so, why not, let us not think in this way.' He had a fertile brain for evolving formulas.

Shri Nanda: Did he speak well and write well?

Shri Patel: I would not say that he wrote literature but he certainly argued well.

Shri Nanda: What do you think of his books, Integration of Indian States and Transfer of Power?

Shri Patel: I think, they are good presentations of factual things as they took place. He hasn't gone in for any deep theoretical thinking or argument.

Shri Nanda: That is what I was going to ask you. He was a man who spent all the years in the Centre and States levels with a very dramatic and uninterrupted involution. Nobody could have been placed in a more strategic point. Yet what he wrote is merely descriptive and it is very factual.

One gets the feeling that it is lacking in drama.

Shri Patel: I think that was because he was not a writer and he did not write the book, the book was written by somebody whom he gave the material and with whom he discussed. He, of course, read through the whole thing.

Shri Nanda: This is very much like a note in the Reforms' Office. I am not criticising him, but I was saying that here was a man, apart from you there and no body else, who was in the centre of things and then when his account came, it is full enough but it is not dramatic enough. I think it was high drama. There is no doubt about it. Of course, you were both working together closely but more as Civil Servants than as champions of the Indian national cause.

Shri Patel: So far as he was concerned, I think he had certainly become very much emotionally involved in everything. So far as I was concerned, there is no question of my being involved in the same way, because I wasn't concerned with the actual formulation.

Shri Nanda: Were you in the Cabinet Secretariat?

Shri Patel: I was in the Cabinet Secretariat again when the Partition came. Mine was the major responsibility, not just in respect of Partition, I was not only the Member of the Steering Committee from India's side with Mohammed

Ali being the Member of the Steering Committee from Pakistan side, but I was also the Partition Secretary. So I had still to remain the Civil Servant.

Shri Nanda: But there could have been reasons; one was your long training that conditioned you to retain objectivity even under tension?

Shri Patel: That is true and it is probably that which enabled me to discharge those duties well and, I think, inspired a considerable amount of confidence among the Muslims, too. People now don't think back about it, but consider this that on 15th August, 1947 there were only six matters on which agreement could not be reached and which had to be referred to Arbitration Tribunal.

Shri Nanda: In the Partition Council?

Shri Patel: They had to be referred to the Arbitration Tribunal and then those six matters also were eventually taken back from the Arbitration Tribunal and settled by the Steering Committee members, myself and Mohammed Ali.

Shri Nanda: How did you find Mohammad Ali to work with?

Shri Patel: He was, of course, a deeply involved person. He was very much a Muslim, emotionally involved, but at the same time he himself was very much trusted and he

was the Principal Adviser of Jinnah, when these discussions began. But on the whole, they found that after the 15th August, 1947 also several attempts were made because Mountbatten was keen on seeing that everything could be tied up before he went, so that nothing went to the Arbitration Tribunal. And after the 15th August, 1947 there were three or four meetings of the Partition Council, most of them here and at which further efforts were made to get these points settled and even then when nothing could be settled, Gulam Mohammad who later became Governor-General, Sir Archibald Rowland who had been taken by them as their Financial Adviser and Liaquat Ali they came over to discuss with Sardar Patel. They discussed for a couple of hours on the question of going backwards and forwards, and finally Sardar Patel said, 'Look, I don't think we are going to get any nearer a solution this way; I am quite prepared to accept whatever conclusions; whatever recommendations, they (pointing to Mohammad Ali and me, H.M. Patel) would advise.' And so, Ghulam Mohammad said, 'I am also agreeable', And so we - Mohammad Ali & I - went outside the room. We went out. We called couple of our lieutenants, Rungachari and one or two other people, sat down and within an hour and a half, we had the answer.

Shri Nanda: Rungachari is dead.

Shri Patel: Yes. He was a very fine chap, very able man. So the whole thing was tied up.

<u>Shri Nanda</u>: You remember at the London Seminar I made a point that the Civil Servants on both sides, before Independence were really able to cooperate with each other most of the time, and would have cooperated even after Independence, but for the unfortunate explosion of the Punjab riots. And I was then contradicted by our friend Usman Ali. He took me aside after the meeting and he said, 'What did you say? You say about things being very cordial !' And I said, 'It is quite clear from what Mr. Patel had said and you had said, it followed'. He said, 'No, no, we just accepted it at that time because there was no time to wait and so on. We had to do something.' I said, 'You tell me Mr. Usman Ali, as you look back on the period before August 1947; do you think that it was a question of absence of ill-will, if not goodwill? 'I said, 'That is the first step towards goodwill and the improvement might have continued but for Kashmir, communal riots etc.'

<u>Shri Patel</u>: That is right, there is no doubt about it. The riots and all those events which took place were unpredicatable and unexpected. To some extent, one anticipated trouble and arrangements had been made; whether those arrangements were adequate or not, that is another matter.

<u>Shri Nanda</u>: Three major issues on this, about which we could talk now. One is the working of the Partition Council and the Secretariat. Getting more details, would be most useful to us. And the second would be the outbreak of

the riots. The third is about the situation in Delhi when it took place. That was the ugly part and it could not be controlled.

Shri Patel: Certainly the Partition Council was constituted with Mountbatten, as the Chairman. Lord Mountbatten was the Chairman, and India was represented by Sardar Patel, Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Rajaji, and Pakistan was represented by Jinnah, Liaquat Ali and Abdul Rab Nishtar with two people in the Steering Committee, myself and Mohammed Ali, as co-equals. It was like this, under the Steering Committee were organised a number of committees on different subjects, which were all drawn up by Mohammed Ali and myself with terms of reference which were agreed on. Those terms of reference were, of course, approved by the Council. There were differences there which were settled up by the Partition Council. When we say settled by Partition Council that is partly like this. As Cabinet Secretary. I would send up the agenda saying that these were the terms of reference for the Finance Committee. There were differences on one or two points. My view was .... Mohammed Ali's view was ... Then before the meeting of the Partition Council George Abell or Mountbatten would send for me or send for Mohammad Ali or both of us for discussion and finally, it would all be tied up.

Shri Nanda: Some points you agreed after discussion.

Shri Patel: Yes, because our object on these major things always was to try and see how we could agree

without involving ourselves into any kind of major difficulty. But those committees would meet, make their recommendations; where they were not able to agree, the Steering Committee would have discussions with the Chairmen of those Committees and then formulate their own views, get those people to modify or take a different view: if no agreement could be reached, the Steering Committee itself would attempt reconciliation: and if it too failed, an agreed note would be placed before the Partition Council, who would then make a further attempt at agreement. I do not know if you have seen the proceedings of those; you can get hold of the Partition Council's Minutes.

Shri Nanda: Partition Council proceedings?

Shri Patel: Yes, it would indicate all these.

Shri Nanda: Were they printed?

Shri Patel: Yes, I had them printed. When these things came, before we went to the Paritition Council, naturally Mohammad Ali was expected to go and brief all his people and I would be expected to brief Sardar Patel and other people and if there were differences one would explain things to them and then discussions would take place.

Shri Nanda: Now in those discussions with your own members of the Partition Council, Rajaji, Rajendra Prasad and Sardar Patel, did all of them take interest?

Shri Patel: Now this is an interesting thing. On

our side, I think, they had left it to Sardar Patel.

Shri Nanda: Why did they do so? Because Rajaji is a very acute intellect. He could have assisted Sardar Patel.

Shri Patel: Yes, I think it was left in this to Sardar Patel. If he wanted to consult them on any issue......

Shri Nanda: Just to avoid friction.

Shri Patel: Yes, and he would consult them without my being there.

Shri Nanda: Now this was really a shrewd move, that is what the practice seemed to have been if I may use the crude words, to leave it to the strongst of the sub-committee or a Committee, giving him veto, so to say, so that there was no friction.

Shri Patel: The only interesting thing was that Pandit Nehru took no interest whatsoever.

Shri Nanda: He left it to Sardar Patel.

Shri Patel: Throughout this Partition Council affair, which divided the two countries, he was not at the meeting.

Shri Nanda: But then Sardar Patel might have consulted him on some points.

Shri Patel: Not to my knowledge but he might have informed him. But I know if he (Nehru) had been there, he would have probably wanted to discuss also, because there were a number of issues on which he would have had his own views.